

# CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

Jayantha Dhanapala is troubled by democracy submitting to populism in Sri Lanka

Sir Winston Churchill said it most famously in a House of Commons speech two years after his historic electoral defeat in 1945: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Churchill, who led Britain in World War II in its triumph over the fascist dictatorships of Germany and Italy, was referring to the well-known weakness of democracy in the efficient delivery of goods and services to society. However, supporters of democracy consistently affirmed that the basic freedoms and fundamental rights of that system more than compensated for this deficiency.

The late Samuel Huntington, the distinguished Harvard political scientist, saw three waves of democracy – first, a surge in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century till about 1922 when fascism emerged; next, the period after World War II (to which the emergence of a democracy in Sri Lanka can be traced) and finally, the much celebrated third wave after 1974, especially following the end of the Cold War, when more countries became democracies. Some talk unconvincingly of a fourth wave, with the Arab Spring and developments in Myanmar.

Almost seven decades after Churchill, Francis Fukuyama who will be remembered for hailing the end of the Cold War as the “end of history,” has now suggested that good



governance and democracy are not synonymous. Coming from a political scientist who saw liberal democracy and free-market capitalism as the ultimate form of government, this is a major act of apostasy. Writing in the March issue of the *Governance* journal, Fukuyama focuses on the need to measure good governance as the ability of governments to make and enforce rules, and deliver services irrespective of whether a country is democratic or not. So we are

back to the old argument that if trains run on time and people are provided with essential services, then indeed all will be well. The argument that democracy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for good governance is supported by that high priest of the Singapore model Kishore Mahbubani, in the discussion of Fukuyama’s article in the columns of the journal.

Interestingly, a Chinese scholar from Tsinghua University makes the point that

even where low-quality governance exists in democratic countries and high-quality governance exists in non-democratic countries, trying to measure governance has not been easy. The common definition of good governance (a term that initially emerged in the literature on economic development) is the enlargement of choices placed before society, and the efficient delivery of public services to the people to serve their political and economic needs.



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Elections, civilian control of the military and other well-known features of the modern liberal democratic state must give way. Bureaucracy is partly to blame for not ensuring that initiatives are encouraged from the people, rather than from the leaders. The employees of public institutions have a special responsibility to observe the rule of law by upholding the Constitution and rejecting illegal orders.

The defence of democracy in the face of populism depends ultimately on public vigilance. Political parties must also play a crucial role in educating the public on the undermining of democratic space. A similar role can be played by non-governmental organisations, university teachers, professional leaders, the clergy and other traditional leaders of society. The challenges to democracy arise from new sources and not always from the more conventional coups d'état, revolutions, terrorist attacks and other extra-parliamentary sources.

Democracy contains the seeds of its own destruction, although it is a system capable of renewing itself at the same time. Eighty years after 1933, it is important to recall that Adolf Hitler's assumption of power in Germany was achieved through democratic elections. Franklin D. Roosevelt had it right when he said: "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy therefore, is education."

Good governance must be sustainable and only accountability, transparency and predictability can ensure this. Ultimately, the institutions of democracy are what guarantees good governance.

The relevance of all this to contemporary political developments in Sri Lanka arises from trends towards majoritarianism, militarisation and populism around a leader who has undoubtedly brought relief to a nation by ending a brutal conflict. Parallels to the present populism in Sri Lanka can be seen in places as varied as Europe, Latin America and

Africa, at different periods of history. It has typically arisen when socio-economic conditions are stressful and usually emerge around charismatic leaders. But it has also been anti-pluralist.

Populism offers simplistic solutions to complex problems. It is based on an antagonistic relationship between 'we' and 'they,' which sometimes translates into 'we the genuine patriots' and 'they the foreign-funded agents of imperialism.' Political scientists do not regard populism as an ideology, but see it as a strategy.

Populism, being inherently anti-institutional, challenges the institutional safeguards of democracy beginning with the Constitution, which has to be amended if it cannot be flouted. The separation of powers – so fundamental to any democratic system – is blurred if not eliminated as the Executive emerges as the dominant branch of government on the basis of being the elected representative of the people who are indisputably sovereign.

Thus, the independence of the judiciary, human rights safeguards, a free media and an independent Commissioner of